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CHRISTOPHER LEKAS
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ALBANIA 1934
AGE 9

SHIP: "THE SATURNIA"
PORT:
RESIDENCES:
ALBANIA: GLINA
US: WORCESTER, MA

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here in Worcester, Massachusetts on December 7, 1994. I'm here with Christopher Lekas, who came in 1934, when he was nine years old, from his village in Albania, although he and his family have always been Greek.

LEKAS: Fine.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Okay. Well, I'm very happy to get to talk with you. And why don't we start at the very beginning, you give me your birth date.

LEKAS: All right. I was born February 17, 1925, in Glina, Albania G-L-I-N-A.

LEVINE: And did you live in Glina until you . . .

LEKAS: Until – until I left when I was sev-- nine years old, in 1934. It was customary in those days that the males or the husbands came to America, tried to make some money, left their families behind, and visited -- on occasion. My father left my mother pregnant in 19-- let's say from '24 to '25 when I was born. And did not return until 1934 when he decided to visit. And my mother decided she didn't want any visit, she wanted to come to America. So he sent for us and brought us here.

LEVINE: So the first time you saw your father was when he came back . . .

LEKAS: That's right.

LEVINE: I was introduced to him at nine years old, in Worcester.

LEVINE: Does . . .

LEKAS: All right.

LEVINE: Oh, in Worcester, or when he came back there?

LEKAS: No, he didn't meet us in New York. No, he didn't come. We came by boat. He sent the tickets.

LEKAS: Oh, I see.

LEVINE: And he sent for us. And we traveled alone, my mother and I came to New York -- Ellis Island and I remember very clearly that I was flea-infested. They shaved my head, they deloused me. I don't know, DDT, I suppose, in those days. And we boarded a train overnight, came to Worcester in the morning. My father met us at the train station.

LEVINE: What was that like for you?

LEKAS: Well, it was very traumatic and exciting, as a nine-year old boy now being introduced to his father for the first time. And my mother said, "This is your father." Hugs and kisses or what have you. I will say that I came to a fairly, fairly, not wealthy type of an arrangement. In 1934, people did not have too much, as everybody knows. However, my father had a slight business. He was a ven—a vendor. He sold hot dogs, popcorn, sodas, and whatnot. And he did very well. So we had more than the average immigrant, I should say. So we were fairly comfortable. Uh, not much, we didn't, we weren't wealthy. We, uh, started off, I didn't know a word of English. Shall I keep going now, or you want to ask any questions?

LEVINE: Well, I'll tell you, that's good. But I think maybe we'll start, and we'll talk about life in Albania, then we'll get . . .

LEKAS: All right.

LEVINE: To the whole sequence.

LEKAS: Fine.

LEVINE: So, were you ever told anything about your birth?

LEKAS: Yes. My mother was, well, let's start with my mother's, marrying my father at fourteen. She was fourteen years old.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

LEKAS: Lambrini, which means brightness.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

LEKAS: L-A-M-B-R-I-N-I. Lambrini.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

LEKAS: Fortiatus [ph] was her maiden name.

LEVINE: F, or P-H?

LEKAS: I would – I would -- it's spelled both ways. I've some Fortiatuses here that spell it was an F, and some with P-H. Hers, I would say, is an F, because that's the way our family--. And, uh, she came from a large family, married my father when she was fourteen, had -- my brother was born and she was fifteen. I came ten years later at twenty-five. She was twenty-five years old when she had me. I had a village beginning. Went to school, Greek school, for two years, and then compulsory Albanian school in the village for the next two years. From – from 1933 and 1934, uh, I was obliged to learn Albanian. At that time King Zog insisted that all the area be more indoctrinated with Albanian culture, so language and what have you. And 1934 was the date that we decided, or my father decided, to bring us to America.

LEVINE: Well, talk about Glina a little.

LEKAS: Glina.

LEVINE: What was it like? What do you remember about it?

LEKAS: Oh. Let's -- let's – let's picture, uh, a little – little village of perhaps fifty to seventy-five houses, or homes. Uh, rocky, very hilly. My father was, as I said, pretty well-off, so he sent a lot of money over there. And my mother, and my uncles and what have you, bought a lot of land. We maybe had fifteen, twenty acres of land.

LEVINE: And what did you use it for?

LEKAS: Grow, uh, potatoes, corn -- farming.

LEVINE: Did you have livestock?

LEKAS: We had li—we had sheep, we had all the other farm animals, like a horse, goats, uh . . .

LEVINE: Chickens?

LEKAS: Several cows, chickens (he laughs) for eggs. We had everything to eat from the garden, from our own vegetables and from our animals. And, of course, the holidays, we could always, uh, slaughter a lamb or what have you, and have meat. We had one grocery store. It was a general store. We could buy salt and coffee and, okay, yeah. And, uh, oil and vinegar and what have you, at the store. There was a little – little club, like a coffee house, where the men gathered, and there wasn't very much of anything else to do but run around and play games with the other boys that -- with stones or with sticks, or . . .

LEVINE: Can you remember any of the games that you played?

LEKAS: Ah, if you can picture stickball, or rolling stones, we would try to gather stones that were spherical or very round, so we can roll them, like boci, if you're familiar with the Italian game boci, we'd play that game. Then hide n' seek was, I guess was an international game that people played. And I was too young to chase girls, so that was out of the question.

LEVINE: How about stories? Did your mother or father, or grand, not your father, but your grandparents or anybody ever tell you fairy tales or stories that you can remember?

LEKAS: Well, I don't remember too many things about stories.

LEVINE: Songs? Did you have, like, did you learn . . .

LEKAS: We had, yeah, school songs and ethnic songs, and Greek and Albanian, uh, well, there was, the, uh, national anthems, the others, you know, typical songs, and there was the Easter songs and Christmas songs. We had, religion was free, I mean, it was not, you know, suppressed. So even though we were in a – in a Moslem, uh, environment, because Albania was, and still is, maybe eighty-five percent Moslem.

LEVINE: Were there Albanian in your town, in your village?

LEKAS: No, no, no. It was all Greeks.

LEVINE: All Greek.

LEKAS: We spoke Greek, uh, we had a Greek church, um, oh, we spoke Albanian, too, and then some people spoke Turkish. Some people spoke Italian. Not – not as a primary language, they knew. Because that area was overrun by countries -- by Italy, by various other countries, and it was, it mingled. And the people learned.

LEVINE: How do you describe that area and what . . .

LEKAS: Well, the area that I was familiar with and, believe me, you don't go more than five, six miles, because it's on horseback or on foot. In that particular village it was very mountainous and very rugged, no roads. Just paths for, let's say, horses or people to walk. That's – that's about it. There wa—there was no highways or any kind of automobiles. Uh, there was a small river that was dry most of the year. There was water in it for maybe three or four months in the wintertime. In the summer it would dry up.

We had, uh, friends and relations in various villages because we, or it was customary -- we inter-married from one village to another, so you had cousins and sisters marry in another village, an aunt over in another place, so there was a lot of visitations, but they were only two or three kilometers apart, so you could walk to one village or the other. And, on occasions there was feast days or name days, as we'd call them in the Greek culture, that we'd go and visit, and they would come to visit us. So we were very, very close, and closely knit that way, by the various visitations.

LEVINE: Would you go to family on the main days, or . . .

LEKAS: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Other people would come, too?

LEKAS: Oh, other people, too. Let's say, uh, a typical wedding in the village, there's no invitations. The entire village would attend the wedding. Everybody goes. And a – and a wedding, a typical wedding would start some time in Friday, they would celebrate independently. The groom's family would celebrate Friday, Friday night, Saturday all day, and the bride's family would do likewise in their house or in their neighborhood. Sunday usually it was, that was the wedding day, the bride and groom get together, they have the wedding. Then the f—the real festivities of the wedding begin, combined -- with the two families, drinking, dancing, eating for maybe three days. People would sleep outdoors, some would be overwhelmed by liquor. They would just roll over and sleep and wake up and eat again.

The women would be cooking all day long. And the men would, well, because it's -- it was like a chauvinistic [sic] area, the women did nothing but work, work, work, in the garden, in the fields, at home, taking care of the children, and the men did a little work, a little hunting, a little farming, but for the most time hang around the coffee house and play cards and visit, and tell stories. They were great storytellers about, "Oh, well, I got a letter from America, and they got such-and-such an invention. And the Americans now have a thing where there's a voice that goes through the wire. They call it something like telephone. They have another thing that voice travels in the air, and it's a radio or something." And, uh, they would go on and on, and tell of these unbelievable stories.

LEVINE: Do you remember hearing them when you were a little boy?

LEKAS: Oh, yes. I – I -- they used to enjoy having me go to the coffee house and sing some songs that they taught me where, I would say, had very questionable words. (he laughs) And they, they taught me these – these songs, and they would treat me to a little candy type of thing called a lukumi -- lukum.

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

LEKAS: Well, it's a Turkish delight. It's – it's a – it's almost like a jello type of thing, with powdered sugar on it. And they would give me that if I would get up on the table and sing this, I would call it a dirty song. But I didn't even know what it was, what the words meant or anything, but they would laugh, and I would go on my way. The following day I'd want a lukumi, and I would go back, and they would say, "Up on the table, Chris. Get up there. Sing the song." (he laughs)

LEVINE: Would you go there like with a relative?

LEKAS: No, no. I -- roaming around, no, by myself, walking around as an eight, nine-year-older. I remember I -- we, in my village was famous for onions and sconions [sic]. They, for some reason or other it was like, uh, the village grew a lot of onions. And I remember as a, oh, maybe six-year-older, the whole family (my uncles, my mother and aunts) were harvesting the onions in the fields, and they would sack them, put them in sacks, put them on the horse, put me in the saddle, and I, as a six-year-old, now, come with the horse to the barn back at the house, which was maybe a mile or two away.

But I felt very, very independent and very big that I would ride the horse and deliver the onions, as a – as an adult now. And thank God the horse knew the way. (he laughs) Because they would just slap it on the behind, and the horse just went on its way, and I just started. And it – it would go to the, to the barn, where an old, old man would be there, and he'd take the sacks off, and he'd whack the horse, and he'd go down the -- back down to the farm. And I – and I was on horseback, back and forth. And I, uh, well, I was very proud doing that. I thought I was very big.

LEVINE: How about your grandparents? Were they around at all?

LEKAS: I only met my grandmothers. My two grandfathers passed away before I was born.

LEVINE: What do you remember about them?

LEKAS: Well, my, my father's mother actually raised me. She was always at home. My mother worked out in the fields, and I'd go to school and come home for lunch and she'd be there. I'd come home after school, she'd be there. Most of the time, I spent more time with my grandmother as a boy than I did with my own mo-- mother. And, uh, she cared for me like, oh, I was her treasure.

LEVINE: What was she like?

LEKAS: Oh, she was a sweetheart. Very short, lovable woman. Uh, oh, I don't think she was five feet tall. She was four-seven, four-eight.

LEVINE: And what was her personality like?

LEKAS: Oh, her personality was, uh, friendly towards everybody. I don't think she had an enemy in the world. She, uh, had both, her -- she had two sons and a daughter. Her daughter died of, I believe, tuberculosis. Ethel, she died. My father, Michael, and my Uncle Charles, were in America when I was growing up. So she had, her family was scattered. She lost a daughter, her two sons were in America. She'd see them every ten years or so when they'd visit, and that was about it. And then she died when I was, I'd say I was six years old when she passed away with pneumonia or something. I think she had pneumonia and she died.

LEVINE: Can you remember any attitudes or, uh, values or any things that she tried to instill in you as a child?

LEKAS: Now I don't remember too much that way.

LEVINE: Was she strict at all?

LEKAS: No. No, no. There wasn't very much that we could do wrong, so that there was no need for, to be restricted or to be punished or to be disciplined. There was nothing that we could break. There was no delicate things. There was no treasures that we could damage. There was, we didn't, there was no need to steal anything. There was nothing valuable to steal. So we couldn't do anything wrong so that we had – so that we can be disciplined for, so, uh, all I remember with my grandmother and -- now, there was the other grandmother also, my mother's grandmother, but we didn't live with her. My father's grandmother lived with us. My mother's mother was in a village about three mi– three miles away. So that was a visit type of thing. We would visit her maybe on weekends, uh . . .

LEVINE: Who? You and your mother?

LEKAS: My mother and I would walk, or we'd take the horse and go on horseback, and I, I can remember going by my gra—my maternal grandmother's house. To go there we would pass by her, oh, a kind of a farm or an orchard where she had cherries. And we would just cut a branch of cherries, and there'd be a whole branch of ripe cherries on it, and we would eat the cherries as we went along till we got to the house. And, uh, oh, and then every time we'd get there it wouldn't be fifteen minutes she start cooking pancakes and pitas and Greek pastries and Greek goodies, to please us.

LEVINE: Do you remember any foods that you particularly liked that you remember from your boyhood?

LEKAS: Yes. I think, I re--. Well, meat was kind of scarce, so roast lamb, chickens, uh, that type, barbecued meats, uh, every family raised a pig. Once a year they would get a piglet and fatten it up, and they would slaughter it at Christmas time. So came December, every household had a pig that was about two hundred, two hundred fifty pounds. They would slaughter it and salt some of it, put some of it in, uh, they'd preserve it, then there was bacon. And they would use that meat throughout the winter. That pig, uh, well, they would – they would stretch it, but they would use that meat for maybe a month or two. The coolness of the winter preserved it. The salt that they -- a lot of it was salted so they would preserve it that way, so that would -- that took care of most of the -- most of their meat needs through the winter. Then spring . . .

LEVINE: What did they fatten them up with?

LEKAS: Oh, they ate – oh, they ate vegetables, they ate all the leftover food that. I don't know what – what pigs eat, but they, I know we used to get them, they were little – little bit of things, and I used

to play with them, and then before I knew it they were not to play with. They were too big. They would get monstrous. And in – in about six, seven months, they would -- they would be triple in size. Yeah. But then spring came, and then would be lambs and goats and little kids, and they would be our pets for – for a few weeks. When they were little, when they couldn't walk too good, a little lamb or a little goat, we'd take care of it.

LEVINE: Did you have any, like, pets as we know them?

LEKAS: Oh, I had kittens and I had birds. Uh, my mother would occasionally, let's say, catch a bird or a little, little bird that couldn't fly. She would bring it home to me. I would keep it in a cage-type thing, and that would be my kind of a pet, until a cat got at it. And that happened two or three times with different birds. The cat, then I want to kill the cat, because it killed the bird. (he laughs) Yeah.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. So, uh, you know, you said that people didn't steal because there was nothing of value.

LEKAS: Nothing.

LEVINE: What was valued? What kinds of things did people have?

LEKAS: We'd have -- there was a lot of barter. There was no money to speak of. There was a little money, but most of the, uh, let's say, values or money that we had in the village came from America. The husbands of the wives, a lot of, there was a lot of women and old people, and young kids. No male to speak of would stay in the village after he was seventeen, eighteen years old. He'd either go to Athens or he'd go to Australia or Argentina or Germany or America. They would leave, or they'd go to Istanbul, Constantinople at the time, I guess they called it, to work.

And they would come, uh, every two or three years come back to the village, visit, bring some good things to the people, or some fabric to make clothes, or what have you, and then they would go again, so that, uh, value would be, uh, a check occasionally would arrive from America that we would cash at the nearby grocery store, or give it to the grocer and he would hold it, and we would go there on occasion and purchase things, and he would just take it off the, on account. Um, other things that I can remember is . . .

LEVINE: Did people have any kind of jewelry or candlesticks or anything in the family that they really treasured?

LEKAS: No, there's very little of that, very little. I, they had some gold, uh, coins. I don't know whether they would be solid gold or what, but they would be either gold-plated that the, the bride's outfit or gown or the bride's, well, shall I call it a trousseau or her marrying – her marriage, uh, outfit.

LEVINE: It wasn't really a gown, was it?

LEKAS: Well, it was, it was like a dress, and it would be a top to it, and then she would have some headdress that had a lot of coins and, like, like , what would we call it, like, uh, embroidery and gold coi-- threads and gold coins, almost like, not tassels, but, uh, what do you call those things that you girls sew on?

LEVINE: Sequins?

LEKAS: Like sequins, but they would be round coins, around the forehead, in this headdress. And it was customary and traditional, I suppose, that a bride had to wear those at her wedding for good luck or, to show that, oh, she came from wealth or something.

LEVINE: Well, now, uh, was there anything else about the weddings there that is different from the way that it is here?

LEKAS: Well . . .

LEVINE: I mean, besides the . . .

LEKAS: Well, the way I described it at the beginning, uh, I can remember that the . . .
LEVINE: Three days.

LEKAS: Oh, yeah. It went on and on. People celebrated for long periods. And, as I said, everybody in the village was invited. There was no need to send invitations or to even orally invite. It was understood that everybody was invited. It was just, open house. You've got to remember now, there's only about fifty to seventy houses. In the bigger cities or towns, I don't know if that tradition held true, where there was five, six hundred homes. But in a little hamlet like Glina, as I mentioned before, everybody was welcome to attend, and they all visited on holidays, they would sit and have coffee, uh, come one come all, no telephones, no electricity.

No running water except we had a, there was a little well that we, the women went to with containers and filled and brought to the house on a daily basis or every other day for washing and cooking. It was very, very plain and simple, simple life. Uh, the wedding, II -- remember when my uncle got, when my uncle married my aunt I was seven years old. And it was customary that when the bride came to the groom's house for the first time she came veiled, and it was customary for a young boy to unveil her. She's on horseback, coming to the house, and it was my, well, responsibility now, or good fortune, to unveil my aunt.
LEVINE: Was this before the marriage ceremony, or . . .

LEKAS: No, after. After the church ceremony, everything, now she's, she is going to come to the house for the first time to ri-- . . .

LEVINE: When she goes to the house where the groom lived?

LEKAS: That's right, for the first time. And she comes all in her veil over her face and everything. And it was customary that a young boy was, it was good luck for a young boy to unveil her. And they asked that

I would have the pleasure. I didn't want to do it. I cried. I didn't want to be the center of attention. I ran around. They chased me. They, and with tears, I climbed this rock so that I could reach, because she was on horseback, I'll never forget this, I had to climb a big, big boulder to reach, to unveil her. And when she embraced me and hugged me and gave me a big kiss, I was all excited. Anyway, those are -- those are some of the, uh, traditions that I don't know if they hold true today, but now we're saying sixty, seventy years ago.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other kind of rituals like, uh, around maybe births or baptisms or deaths, funerals or something?

LEKAS: Well, I'll -- I'll – I -- it was, traditionally when there was a christening, when a boy or a girl was baptized, the mother did not attend. She stayed home. She, and she had no choice, uh, on naming the child. The godparent, godmother and godfather, had the privilege of naming that child to whatever, whatever they wanted to name it. The mother was not even consulted, or the father. So that she stayed home now, anxious to find out what her son or daughter's going to be named.

LEVINE: Oh, the child wasn't named until the christening?

LEKAS: That's right. The christening was, and when the godfather announced the name, during the ceremony, during the baptism, that was the first time that that boy or girl was named.

LEVINE: And it could be months after the birth.

LEKAS: Usually forty days. It was customary, on the fortieth day, fifty days, it would be baptized. Uh, now, here's what, the point I brought this up was that the young children would wait at the church's door to hear the name so that they could run to the house and deliver the good news to the mother what the name is, so that they could get rewarded with a penny or a nickel, in Albanian coins, of course, but they would get something. So then they would run so that they could announce the name, which was, oh, a big – big happening for the kids, and they would all run, see who's going to be the first one to get there for the good news.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: How about funerals? Were they any different than here?

LEKAS: Yeah. They still are. Funerals there -- well --very, very, uh, noisy. They had women that would lament and cry. Some of them were almost – almost paid people to – to -- at the gravesite, to cry ritualistically and tell stories. "Oh, how you left your wife! Why did you die, and you left so many orphans behind?" and so on. In a kind of a s-- well, not a song, but lamenting, a sad type of thing. And this would go on and on. And . . .

LEVINE: Was it like chanting?

LEKAS: Yes. Yeah. And they would, they would, it's a sing-song type of lamentation, and they would tell stories of how bad it was for that person to die and leave these people behind.

LEVINE: Did they ever say good things about the dead person?

LEKAS: I don't remember that. I always remember them almost, uh, angered at the fact that they died and left these people behind, and left the orphans, and, uh, untimely death, why did you leave at, you know, this time, why didn't you, uh, I suppose, why didn't you wait a while. (he laughs) You know.

LEVINE: And how about the funeral themselves, itself? I imagine people were in the house, right?

LEKAS: Yes. There was no funeral homes, not in the village. No funeral parlors. They didn't 'wake' them. They didn't have embalming, you know, fluids, or anything of that nature, so a person died, then he got – he -- he was buried the next day or no – no waiting. Uh, I don't remember waking anybody too long. Overnight . . .

LEVINE: Was there a cemetery?

LEKAS: Oh, yes. Outside the church there was the burial grounds, in our village. Next to the church was a school. Um, he had, oh, there was a custom, and I think it still exists in the Greek culture, that after, oh, maybe five, ten years they dig up the grave, remove the bones of the individual, and put him in an area designated for all the bones. Next to the church there would be a -- an area, it was an enclosed, like a bin, where they would put all the bones.

LEVINE: On top of the earth?

LEKAS: Yes. All these bones were now were exposed. Just put all the -- bones of the dead people, the skeletons . . .

LEVINE: In together?

LEKAS: Yes. The skeletons, and everything, they put them there, and now there was nothing left in the grave, so that they can use it again.

LEVINE: Oh, so there wasn't like a marker the way we have in a cemetery?

LEKAS: No. No. No. There was a burial. Oh, they'd – they'd designate it. They know that that's where the, you know, that particular person is. But, uh, they knew, I suppose, that after five years that body disintegrated to just skeletal, and they would dig it up, take the bones, and put them in this designated area, and then bury somebody else there.

LEVINE: Do you think the reason was a practical one about somebody else could be buried there, or do you think there was some . . .

LEKAS: There was plenty of land. There was plenty of land that I don't know, I, I don't know now why that custom existed. Whether it was to save land so they could use land over and over again, but I know that they have the, they save bones of bishops and kings and, you know, very important people, that they just put these bones in an area and they just save 'em.

LEVINE: And nothing else was ever . . .

LEKAS: No.

LEVINE: They would just save them.

LEKAS: No markers, no -- no nothing. I know in certain, uh, cathedrals, they do have, in certain areas, the bones of the archbishops . . .

LEVINE: And the saints.

LEKAS: And the saints, and what have you. They put the bones. So maybe that's a carryover from that. I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh, let's see. How about school? When did you start school, and what was school like for you?

LEKAS: I, I started school when I was, my brother, my brother was with us till I was seven years old. He was ten years older than me. In 1931, my father sent for him and brought him to America. Now, picture this, now. He was born 1915, ten years before me. My mother was married in 1914, fourteen years old. At fifteen she was a mother with my brother. Ten years later I was born. However, my brother was going to school, and I was, he was maybe seventh grade, sixth grade or what have you, but I was only about four years old, three years old. So he would take me with him, and I would sit in class as, well, like a nursing school -- nursery. And, uh, kindergarten or what have you.

LEVINE: This was because your mother was in the fields.

LEKAS: Yeah, and my brother would take me, instead of leaving me with my grandmother. He'd take me with him, and I'd go to school with him. No books, nothing to do but just sit there and listen and gaze at what's going on, or perhaps take in what, the higher grades. It was a one -- one-s— room school.

LEVINE: How did you like that, going with your brother?

LEKAS: Well, I enjoyed that. That was enjoyable. Then for four or five more years I continued and, you know, we went, as I said, we went to compulsory Albanian school in my last two years in the village. Two, three years prior to that was Greek school.

LEVINE: Well, now, when you were, what, when did you, were you learning when you went with your brother? Was the teacher paying attention to you?

LEKAS: Not really, not really. No questioning, no testing, no, uh, no homework, no, no lessons.

LEVINE: When did you start having lessons of your own?

LEKAS: When I – when I became, I was five or six. Then I was properly enrolled in the first grade, second grade, third and fourth. I came to America. Now, I had a knowledge of arithmetic, a little bit of geography, a little bit of history, of course, in the Greek and Albanian language. And when I came to America now, I was nine years old, I had to start school in the first grade. And I can remember going to my first grade class. Two months after I arrived in America, I started school. I didn't know more than two or three words of English. And some of the Greek and Albanian kids in school had to interpret for me and help me out, for the -- maybe for a first half a year until I got onto myself, and I, I – I think I progressed, you know, fast enough, and I got into the mainstream of American life pretty quick with --. In the neighborhood there was a lot of Italian boys, Irish and Jewish. And it wasn't long with playing with them that, it didn't take long for me to pick up the English language and, uh, I was pretty independent after that, after about half a year.

LEVINE: Um, do you remember, well, first of all, what was your brother's name?

LEKAS: Arthur.

LEVINE: And, uh, was it just the two of you, you and Arthur?

LEKAS: Yes. In – in – in the village.

LEVINE: In the village.

LEKAS: When we ge—when we came to America, my mother gave birth to two girls, Ethel and Helen, and they're still living. They live in Massachusetts and, uh, Arthur is no longer with us. My oldest brother passed away three years ago. So there's only three of us left.

LEVINE: Did you, I'm sorry, I'm not sure. Did you tell me your mother's maiden name?

LEKAS: Yes, Lambrini Fortiatus. That was her maiden name.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, uh, how about your father? What was his name?

LEKAS: Michael. Michael Lekas.

LEVINE: And, uh . . .

LEKAS: And I'm surprised that you said Lekas, because that's the Greek way of saying it.

LEVINE: Oh, really? (she laughs)

LEKAS: Yes.

LEVINE: Well, gee.

LEKAS: Now, Lekas is usually customary, the way everybody else says it, but you say Lekas, and it's the way it's said in Greek, Lekas. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, um, tell me about leaving. How did you feel about it when you were . . .

LEKAS: It was very sad. I left an old uncle of my father's who was kind of my popou, like a grandfather to me.

LEVINE: What was his name?

LEKAS: Fotos. Fotos, I used to call him, Popou, and he cried, "Please, don't forget me," as we parted. And that destroyed me. The whole trip I couldn't forget his crying and his plea to not to forget him. And, well, three or four years later he died, but I – I left him behind, and his wife.

LEVINE: How did you leave the village?

LEKAS: We just . . .

LEVINE: What transportation?

LEKAS: Oh, we left on foot, on horseback, till we came to, uh, the nearby highway or road -- there was just a gravel road where a car can pass, was about two miles, three miles away. So we went and . . .

LEVINE: Carrying things?

LEKAS: No, we didn't take too much with us. We left everything, we didn't have much to carry anyway. So we just took our, whatever we had on our backs, very few things that my mother treasured she took along with her in a suitcase and things. Ah, some cooking, believe it or not, some cooking things, cooking utensils. Now, cooking utensils, like, she was going to go to an area where they didn't make pots and pans, but she took a few things like that. She took some, well, her clothes, my clothes, and there was very, very simple, we arrived at the highway, and there was, well, we had an entourage with us, people that came to say goodbye, we got on the, on this little vehicle, it was like a truck, that took us to the main port where we took the boat, a small boat to go to Italy.

And in Italy we took, the boat was named Saturnia, I remember. S.S. Sartunia. It was an Italian ship. And we came across third class. Maybe, maybe the ticket cost a hundred fifty dollars to come to the United States. And I remember the boat, it took ten days to get to New York. And somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, now, this boat was mostly Italians, and a few Greeks. But I was running

around in the boat playing with the Italian boys on the deck, and one day they gathered all the boys and girls, and they were going to have a contest. Now, remember this now. In an Italian boat, the meals were primarily pasta, every night. And we ate at a designated table, the same people ate at that table every night, all the meals, lunch and whatever.

This particular afternoon where we gathered, they gathered all the boys and girls, and they were going to have a contest, tied our hands behind our backs, and put some jam in a dish in front of us, and we were going to eat the jam dog fashion. Well, whoever ate it fastest, or whoever won the contest, was going to get a reward, but I didn't know what they were saying in Italian. I don't know, but I was hungry enough, I guess, or lucky enough, and I finished, and I won the contest. All I can remember is everybody patting me on the back, "Bravo, bravo." And they said a few things, but I didn't know anything. That night at the dinner table a big turkey was served at our table, and a full course turkey dinner. That was the prize. That my table, at the dinner (he laughs) we would be served turkey instead of spaghetti or macaroni that night. Well, the people around the table, well, they were thrilled that I won. They were congratulating me and, oh, I felt . . . (he laughs) I felt quite big, and quite – quite pleased with myself.

LEVINE: Anything else about the voyage you remember?

LEKAS: Oh, the voyage, as a little boy, there was one particular day. There was a very, very loud noise in the engine room. I, as a -- it was a bang, very loud. It created quite a panic with the passengers as though that, like we got torpedoed or we got bombed, and everybody was running around. And I remember running to my mother, I found her, because we were -- I was on one deck running around playing. I found my mother crying, "Ma, what's, we're gonna sink, this and that." Now, for her to comfort me, I'll never forget this, she says to me, "Don't worry, Chris. You see the upper decks up above there?" She says, "We will go up there, and if the boat sinks, don't worry about it." She says, "It'll sit on the bottom of the ocean, but we'll be up above. So we're not gonna go underwater. Don't worry about it." (he laughs) Whether she believed that not, I don't know, to this day. But she comforted me.

LEVINE: Did you believe it at the time?

LEKAS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It calmed me down. But it was just some, some crazy noise. There was nothing, they straightened it out. The boat safely came to New York.

LEVINE: Do you remember the boat coming into the New York Harbor?

LEKAS: I – I we came late at night. We came to New York and I – I -- it was dark. I saw a lot of lights. Lights, lights, lights. Uh, what America looked like was a fantasy in my mind, and it was something that I had just dreamed of and hearing stories that the tall buildings and roads and cars and that, I got exposed to it a little, little bit in Italy, coming across. But America, of course, was going to be very special. So that night is when we – when we got to Ellis Island.

And we were oh, whatever they do there, they process you in, uh, by doctors and all the paperwork we went through. It took several hours. And as I said, I – I suppose that they found lice in my head, and shaving my head, put some kind of chemicals on me. I think it was DDT. The next morning in the train I looked around in the morning now, and it was bright and sunny and gorgeous and June. It was, I think, June 24th. June 24th, when we were in, in 1934.

LEVINE: Did somebody meet you and your mother?

LEKAS: No. No, but there was instructions on our tickets and everything what we were to do, and I guess people just guided us, and we got in the train. Worcester, Massachusetts, okay. We got to Worcester, at the train station, my father met us there. I guess it was arranged that way. And, uh, from then on I guess it's America, America.

LEVINE: Do you remember any things that you saw for the first time that struck you as new and different, the first few days, weeks?

LEKAS: Yeah. Well, I remember my father taking me by the hand to buy me clothes, and walking through the streets. Now, he has to orient me to the traffic lights. It was something new, I didn't know, but the automobiles had to follow red lights, green lights. And I remember my father saying, "When you cross the street, you've got to look at that light. When it's green, you cross. When it's red this way . . ." He was trying to explain to me the safety, street crossing. Oh, not the . . .

LEVINE: The keys will pick it up.

LEKAS: Oh, I see. Okay. Uh, what else can I say? He, uh, the various customs were, naturally, different. America held many surprises to a youngster like me. Um . . .

LEVINE: And you started school a few months later?

LEKAS: I -- I went – I went – I went to public school in September, which was two months later.

LEVINE: So you, did you, you must have met your older brother again?

LEKAS: Oh, for the, yeah. I met him again after three or four years.

LEVINE: What was that like?

LEKAS: Well, that was like, uh, my brother, actually, was more like an uncle to me, because he was ten years older. So it wasn't, we didn't have a brotherly relationship until we got into our thirties, when he was forty. When he was twenty I was ten, so he was like an uncle. When he was, you know, twelve, thirteen, I was two years old. So, but it was, it was exciting to meet my father for the first time, at nine years old.

LEVINE: Did you get used to him quickly?

LEKAS: Oh, yes. He was – he was a very pleasant, very, very mild-mannered person, and he never, never reprimanded me, never punished me for anything. I could do no wrong. And not having the boyhood life with him, it was not strange, but he didn't want to, uh, anger or alienate me or, he took precautions not to, not to – not to hurt me in any way. He was very, very careful to-- I sensed that all along, that he always gave me the benefit of the doubt and I lost him in 1969. He was quite a gentleman. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, do you think that, having come here, uh, as a child from another country, do you think that that made a difference in, like, the kind of person you are, or that influenced you somehow?

LEKAS: Well, I don't understand, now, you mean . . .

LEVINE: Do you think, I guess I'm saying coming here as an immigrant to this country, do you think that made a difference in the kind of person you became?

LEKAS: Uh, yeah, perhaps. I remember my mother and father insisting and saying to me that the priest, the police officer, the schoolteacher, parents, must be obeyed and they must be, uh, let's say, uh, you've got . . .

LEVINE: Respect.

LEKAS: You've got to respect them, do not disobey, and I, I could honestly say that in those early days, early days, I mean, that period, the Greek element believed that wholeheartedly. At that time I could probably say that there weren't many Greek boys in jail, or getting into trouble with the law, or having trouble or difficulties in school. Later on, it melted down. The way of life got Americanized and everything, and that particular feeling kind of washed out. But at the beginning, in the '30s and in the '20s and in the '40s there was an awful lot of respect for the – for the police officer on the street, for the teacher, for – for the the spiritual leaders, and the parents. A lot of respect, and no disobedience.

LEVINE: What do you feel most proud of that you, that you feel like you've done in your life?

LEKAS: I don't know. I don't feel – I don’t feel I've done anything that I should be proud of. I just had a normal life, very . . .

LEVINE: What do you feel grateful for?

LEKAS: Oh, I feel, well, I'll tell you one thing. I'm grateful that I came to America, for one thing. Uh, I was very fortunate that, it was my good fortune that that turn of events came about that I was not left behind in, let's just say Albania, because I had cousins that were left behind, that stayed there, that had a miserable, miserable life. They were in prison. They were tortured, especially the last forty -- thirty – thirty years. It was very difficult to live there under, it was

communistic, it was, uh, there were – there were people in power that were very ruthless, and they had, uh, terrible, terrible rules and regulations. And people were punished unjustifiably. And I'm glad that, as I said, it was my good fortune to have left that area and come to live in America and make this my, my home.

LEVINE: How about heroes? Have you had heroes in your lifetime, either people that you knew or people that were public figures?

LEKAS: The only heroes and idols I, as I said, I became Americanized very, very quickly. I started to idolize ballplayers, you know, people like Ted Williams, and as I grew up I thought the world of, uh, gymnasts and old wrestlers and, well, more or less athletic, uh . . .

LEVINE: Were you yourself athletic?

LEKAS: I was. As a youngster I was very agile. I never did anything professionally. I worked after school so that I couldn't play high school sports, because I left, at two o'clock I would leave school and I'd go and drive a truck, deliver cleaning supplies and what have you. I worked with my father. I helped him in his truck. He had a truck, as I said, that sold hot dogs and, it was a lunch-mobile type of thing.

LEVINE: So what, we have about five minutes.

LEKAS: Oh, we have more time.

LEVINE: Yeah.

LEKAS: Okay!

LEVINE: Tell me, did you marry?

LEKAS: I married an Italian girl, and we have two boys. One is married in Florida, one is unmarried, he's single in Massachusetts.

LEVINE: What's your wife's name and maiden name?

LEKAS: Her maiden name, well, her first name is Yolanda. Her maiden name Leo. Her mother was born in Springfield, Mass, her father was born in Italy. Both Italian, and she gave birth to two boys, as I said, and I have, we have two grandchi-- granddaughters in Florida.

LEVINE: What are your sons' names?

LEKAS: Michael and John. And, uh, Michael is in Florida, John is here. We spend, now we spend four months a year in Florida. We visit them all winter long, and fortunately we escape the harsh winters of New England. But, um, I don't know what else to say to you.

LEVINE: Well, uh, how about your work life? What did you do after . . .

LEKAS: All right. I – I -- I left, I left high school and joined the army in 1943. I, we went to, well, we __ I went in the army, served for three years.

LEVINE: Did you, so you were there during World War Two.

LEKAS: World War Two, in Europe. I got hurt in Belgium, the Battle of the Bulge. I came back, and after recuperating from my injuries, I became a hairdresser. I had a beauty shop in Worcester with two other partners. It was the largest beauty parlor in Worcester, for twenty years. I lost interest in that business, and then for twenty years after that I owned a pizza house. I ran a pizza house from 1965 to 1985. And then retired, and here I am. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And how is this time of your life?

LEKAS: I enjoy it. I thought that I'd be bored to death retiring, but I'm very active with the seniors in the parish here. I'm very active with another fraternal organization. I'm active in church here. I do travel a lot. My wife loves to travel. We go to Greece, we go to Italy. We spend time in Florida. We have friends throughout New England, so that we do a lot of traveling here, so that we're kept busy doing that, so it's not boring. So I can honestly say that retirement is -- was, or is, a very happy time of my life. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else you can think of that has to do with coming to this country, or Worcester, the community of Worcester, maybe, before we close?

LEKAS: Well, the community of Worcester offered me a lot of – lot of good friends, genuine, wholesome friendships that I created in Worcester. I suppose that could have happened anywhere, but my fortune was that Worcester was chosen because my father was in Massachusetts and, you know, he worked here, he worked in Clinton, in Fitchburg, he resided in Worcester when I came here, so we settled here. Uh, but I will say that what a good fortune it was for me to come to America and not stay in all those other countries that I possibly would have been. I feel very fortunate, and very happy and proud to be an American now.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, that sounds like a good place to end.

LEKAS: Yeah.

LEVINE: I want to thank you very much.

LEKAS: Well, it was a pleasure.

LEVINE: Very interesting . . .

LEKAS: Well, I hope it was.

LEVINE: -- of your life. I've been speaking with Christopher Lekas, who came from Albania, who is Greek, came from Albania in 1934 at nine

years old, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

EI-583/LEKAS